You’re at a Scottish festival and you spot a REALLY LARGE guy in a kilt, crouching at the bottom of what looks like a telephone pole (fortunately, he’s wearing bike shorts underneath). He lifts the pole from the bottom, runs across the field with it and throws it into the air, where it lands on its end, then falls over. The crowd cheers. What the heck?! This is the Caber Toss, and it’s one of nine events that Highland athletes compete in across the country and around the world.

Before you head to the Virginia Scottish Games & Festival this Labor Day weekend at Great Meadow in The Plains, VA, we decided to chat with Highland athletes Kearney Smith, Harrison Bailey III, Eric Frasure and Allison Daniel about what Highland Athletics are.

Scots have gathered to test their strength since the 11th Century to improve their military’s abilities. Later, kings and chieftains used Games to choose the best men for their ranks. Pre-industrial implements, like weights to measure grain, quarry hammers, stones and logs also measured strength and power. The Games were much like modern-day track and field. No longer military proving grounds, Highland Games remain much as they were a thousand years ago.

Throwing implements are basic, often handmade (the NFL wouldn’t know what to do with this stuff), but here’s what you’ll see at the Virginia Scottish Games:

**Weight for Distance** is thrown from a 4’6” x 7’6” chalk box that athletes cannot leave when throwing, or else they foul the throw. A judge measures the distance thrown with one end of a measuring tape at the edge of the box. The other end is held by a marker who stands on the field and measures where the implement first lands.

**Braemar Stone Toss**: 19-28 pounds, named for an ancient festival, thrown from a standing position, no running-up or spinning allowed.

**Stone Toss, or ‘clachneart’**: 16-18 pounds, similar to shotput. Athletes can run up or spin to throw, but must keep at least one foot from the sidelines of the box.

**Light and Heavy Weight for Distance**: 28 and 56 pounds. Square weights, originally used for measuring grain. Run-up or spin approach.

**Heavy Hammer**: 22 pounds, it’s a metal ball on a wooden dowel thrown from a standing position. Many athletes use metal spikes mounted to their boots that are driven into the ground for stability while they wind and throw the hammer.

Adjustable height standards like those used in pole vaulting are used in Weight for Height. Each athlete gets three attempts to clear each height.

**Sheaf Toss**: 16 or 20 pounds. A burlap sack is thrown over the bar using a three-tined pitchfork. Serious athletes have their own pitchforks.

**Weight Over Bar**: 28, 42 or 56-pound square weights are thrown over the bar. Athletes will stand directly under or just in front of the bar to achieve the proper trajectory, having to jump out of the way before it lands.

**The Caber Toss** is the signature event and does not involve height or distance. A Caber (Gaelic for “Tree”) is a tree trunk 18-21 feet long, weighing 90-150 pounds. The object is to flip the caber end over end, landing as if pointing to 12:00 from the athlete on an imaginary clock. The caber is stood on its narrow end. The athlete picks it up from the bottom, runs with it to gain momentum and throws it high enough to achieve a flip. Points are awarded from 9:00 – 3:00 on the imaginary clock, or from the angle degree of the athlete if it doesn’t flip, but falls back.